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News and Notes

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The Delicious Wind: Rahawa Haile on the Appalachian Trail

The privies were overflowing, it was raining, and everyone was drunk. After 300 miles of hiking the Appalachian Trail, Rahawa Haile knew she should push on. Standing Bear Farm Hostel, she said, was a bit rundown. An influx of hikers in mid-March 2016 had filled it to capacity. Surely, she thought, her options would improve if she just kept moving. Having replenished her supplies, she decided to continue rather than spend the night. Despite the storm, she shouldered her backpack, determined to reach her next objective.

As the rain fell, Haile made a steep ascent of 2,700 feet, toward the top of Snowbird Mountain. Claps of rolling thunder grew louder and louder as she climbed. The clouds above closed in around her. Lightning flashed in quick succession an instant before each rumble. Within 600 feet of the peak, she knew she was in trouble.

"I'm thinking, Oh this is bad!" she said in an interview. "And sure enough, by the time I reached the summit, there's lightning everywhere."

With no time to enjoy the view, Haile immediately made her descent down the opposite side of the mountain. Heading for the safety and shelter of the campsites below, she ran under the weight of her pack along a 1,500-foot length of trail that had become a slippery wet torrent of cascading mud.

"I don't think I've cried so much on the trail as I did that afternoon," she said. "I was completely alone. There was no one around. The trail was one endless mudslide. I don't think I've ever been so frightened in my life."

The experience of writer Rahawa Haile is not unlike that of many who thru-hike the Appalachian Trail. Sudden dramatic shifts of weather and the unavailability of campsites are to be expected, along with the inundation of mosquitos; monotonous camp food menus; and occasional bouts of mortal fear, emotional despair, or homesickness. But Haile had also to contend with a dire sense of isolation. Along with the weight of her pack, she endured the added burden of having to walk alone on this daunting, 2,179-mile journey from Georgia to Maine as a queer woman of color.

"My goodness! If you want to know loneliness, try being a black woman thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail in Tennessee in 2016," she said. "It was incredibly isolating."

Rahawa Haile in the Mahoosuc Range, in Maine. COURTESY OF RAHAWA HAILE

During the divisive and racially charged climate of the 2016 U.S. election, Haile felt concern, of course. Hiking while black, as the status has come to be called, she was vulnerable not only to the natural elements and the physical rigors of backpacking, but she had to face her own fears and apprehensions, as well. Traveling solo on foot through parts of the country where some individuals and institutions still harbor notions of white supremacy, she worried her life as a black woman would matter little to those who might do her harm.

But inspired by her love of the outdoors and a calling to discover the depths of her character, Haile cautiously ventured onto the AT. Accompanied only by the words of African American writers that spurred her ambitions to go forward, she recalled the moment when her desire to complete the trail turned to resolve.

"I'm standing on Blood Mountain, and I have my first book, and it's Zora Neale Hurston's collection *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing and Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive*, which is just the best title," she said,

smiling with the memory. "It felt like having a friend on Blood Mountain. I'd have to say that's when I could really process it for what it was, this monumental undertaking that I'd committed to."

Just about 5 feet 8 inches tall with a lean frame, warm brown eyes, and a dazzling smile, Haile's appearance reveals nothing mean. Those who meet her are likely impressed by her charming manner and gregarious spirit. Her laughter is infectious. Though Haile, 32, had seldom in her life experienced racially motivated incidents that made her afraid, the periodic appearance of a hateful symbol as she walked through trail towns in the South—on bumper stickers, T-shirts, or even flying over some hostels—made her wary.

"The Confederate flags were just so depressing, especially last year," she said. "I could see which way the country was going. I could see which way the election would go, and I knew that it came from a place of such frustration and resentment. And there was nothing I could do about it. It was hard to carry, on top of the rest of my pack."

The daughter of Eritrean immigrants, Haile is a first-generation African American citizen. She attributes her fondness for the outdoors to her father, who she said "loves nature to death." Growing up in Miami, she took long walks in the woods with her grandmother, who talked about the world outside as a source of strength and healing. Speaking in her native language, the older woman used the words *tuum nifas*, or "delicious wind," to describe how one can draw nourishment even from the air of a gentle breeze. As a child, Haile discovered a friend in nature who, like her books by inspiring black writers, helped her to heal the pain of loneliness. To spend time as a thru-hiker along the Appalachian Trail seemed the most natural thing she could imagine.

"My trail name is Tsehay. It means 'the sun' in Tigrinya, one of the main languages of Eritrea," she said. "I got it because when I walked with my bright orange pack cover on, people said it was like following the sun."

Still, Haile had to reconcile her doubts of being welcome as a black woman who identifies as bisexual in a community populated by a majority of white heterosexual men accustomed to the privileges of manifest destiny. But she realized very quickly that the AT, like nature itself, offered her a nurturing environment that cared nothing about the color of her skin. Cold and wet after her descent from Snowbird Mountain, she arrived a few hours later at

the open grassy summit of Max Patch, where the clouds parted. "There was sun everywhere," she said. "And it was one of the most spectacular views."

She reached her campsite to discover that a trail-angel class of thru-hikers had set out a spread of hamburgers, chips, cookies, soda, and beer for all to enjoy. Haile was welcome to share in the feast and festivities as a true member of a club whose sole requirement for initiation is to arrive prepared to be vulnerable, to face your fears, and to be open to the generosity of life's circumstances that give freely without discrimination.

Setting aside her apprehensions, Haile found fellowship in her love of nature, which she shares with much of humanity. Despite the rifts that divide our nation, Haile discovered in her trail family the delicious wind that cools the fiery pain of loneliness and binds the wounds of despair. By the light of the campfire, as everyone drank beer or sipped from flasks and conversations became more fluid, those gathered there shared their reasons for hiking the Appalachian Trail.

"The most common answer I heard that night was to heal. That's what people were doing out there," Haile said. "I think that was when I felt that I really belonged to a community. And it never stopped for the rest of the way."

—James Edward Mills

James Edward Mills is a wilderness writer and an independent media producer. He was a 2014 fellow of the Mountain and Wilderness Writing Program at the Banff Centre in Alberta, Canada. He is the author of *The Adventure Gap: Changing the Face of the Outdoors* (Mountaineers Books, 2014). He lives in Madison, Wisconsin.

The Way Life Should Be: Assembling the Speck Pond Shelter

With the door completely off, the lap belt holding me to my seat seems like a far cry from something that would actually save me in an emergency. The helicopter's rotator blades accelerate, shifting from a rhythmic to a constant spin, as we effortlessly start to ascend. Ten feet, 35, 50—suddenly we are cruising 200 feet above a sea of fir trees. Soaring over hills and ridges that have stolen hours from my life walking them in years past, we crest the Mahoosuc ridge and bank a hard right just south of Old Speck Mountain. She comes

The workers sit atop their project. JOE ROMAN

into view quicker than I had expected. At 3,400 feet, Speck Pond prevails as Maine's highest body of water—glacier fallout from 12,000 years ago.

Our descent turns the glass surface into a frenzy of motion. Take a deep breath. Slow is smooth, smooth is fast. You don't want to be the guy who falls out of a helicopter. People tend to remember stuff like that. The helicopter slows down and hovers just feet from the shores of the pond. Take my seat belt off, click it back together behind my back, stay low, move quickly. Before I have time to overthink it, touchdown. I'm off the bird and back on the planet. Radio in one hand, helmet in the other. One thousand eight hundred feet higher and 3 miles northeast from where I stood mere moments ago.

But this isn't a joy ride. I'm on the clock for the Appalachian Mountain Club's campsite program, and I'm standing next to local legend John Nininger, the owner and architect of Vermont's Wooden House Company. If you're in need of log shelters in New England then you've heard of this guy. With his signature log design and cedar roofs, his shelters are true pieces of art.

As soon as the helicopter disappears over the hill, the sound quickly dissipates, and we stand there in silence. The experience is jolting. It takes a minute to adjust to our new surroundings. But there isn't much time to spare. We know the chopper will be back, and this time it's not landing but dropping off the first logs of Speck Pond's new shelter. This isn't the days of yesteryear in which one could just cut local native logs on-site and build a new shelter.

No, times have changed. These days, it's a little more complicated than that.

And then we hear it. As the decibels start to rise, we clear the landing zone. Anything that isn't tied down is going to get shaken up. Trees begin to dance with the downdraft of the rotating blades. The helicopter has returned with its first load. Hanging from the bottom of the helicopter via a 45-foot cable, the base logs of the shelter—attached at two points by a nylon sling—come down first. Everything is built off them, so as soon as they hit the ground, we set them with pinpoint accuracy. It won't be long before the chopper returns with more. The stripped, white cedar logs fit together like pieces of a puzzle. Each one is scribed with incredible precision to meet its counterpart.

John isn't as surprised as I am to watch it all come together so quickly. No, this isn't his first rodeo, and it's not the first time he has seen this very shelter constructed. He first assembled it one month ago at his log yard in Vermont, labeling each piece with a number and its weight as he dismantled it and loaded it onto a tractor trailer. Since the 1979 Jet Ranger maxes out at 800 pounds per load, it's important to get as many logs in one lift as possible. At $1,800 an hour (that's 50 cents a second), time is money, and you don't want the helicopter to have to make any unnecessary trips. Matching "out-loads" with the "in-loads" proves harder than I imagined. It's difficult to eyeball 800 shattered wood planks—the old shelter we dismantled last fall. Back and forth, the Jet Ranger flies, as we scramble to prepare the next out-load and set the logs from the last in-load. The 33-year-veteran pilot Carl Svenson is an artist in his own right. Almost as an extension of his own body, he places the in-loads with care from the cable attached to the bottom of his helicopter. I communicate with him through a radio and microphone attached to my helmet.

"Where would you like the next one, Joe?"

"Just about 10 feet east of the shelter, Carl!"

"You got it!" he jovially replies. His demeanor is calm. There's no question this man enjoys his work.

Eight hours later with only a 30-minute lunch break, the deed is done. And just like that, 40 cedar trees accounting for 93 different logs weighing 8,427 pounds come together from 143 hand-scribed notches to form one of the most beautiful shelters I have ever seen. Calmness returns to the shores of the pond.

—Joe Roman

Joe Roman is the Appalachian Mountain Club's campsite program and conservation manager. He writes often for AMC's Trails Blog at outdoors.org/articles/blogs/trails/.

White Mountain Supervisor Tom Wagner: An Appreciation

I remember several things about my first hike with Tom Wagner, not long after he became forest supervisor of the White Mountain National Forest. It was a beautiful summer day on the Franconia Ridge. We covered a lot of ground, physically and in conversation about the national forest. But what I remember most is that both Tom and I had to take regular doses of ibuprofen for our aching knees.

Tom's knees first hurt from an old pick-up-football injury, mine from too many summers packing heavy loads into Appalachian Mountain Club huts. Looking back, I can also see what made Tom a great forest supervisor. He asked good questions and listened to the answers; he was quick to learn; he seemed to understand immediately that the land and the people are inseparable.

The White Mountain National Forest has always been about people. Since its establishment after the passage of the Weeks Act more than a century ago, people have created, loved, and worked tirelessly on its behalf. It was nicknamed "The People's Forest" for good reason. Tom seemed to understand this on our first hike together.

Over the next decade, we shared many hikes. We shared even more meetings. We also shared time sitting at the small round table in his office, where Tom patiently listened to my ideas both good and not so good, and where he listened openly to what I hoped would be received as gentle suggestions. After a session of constructive criticism directed his way, he would often tell his staff, "You're helping me become a better forest supervisor."

News of Tom's September 2017 retirement spread quickly. Fifteen years is a long time for a forest supervisor to stay in one place. Tom Wagner's impact will last well beyond the physical years. I have no doubt that his leadership and his commitment to land stewardship, public service, and his employees will be sorely missed.

Tom displayed what it really means to be a leader: a clear sense of his responsibilities, a willingness to use his power, expecting the best in himself and his employees, pushing hard (sometimes, some folks might say too hard), believing that his employees were the best—and making sure we all acted the best.

What has become clear to me is that what made Tom so outstanding as a public servant and as a leader is that he is, above all, a good citizen. He is passionate about public service and the good that each of us can do, regardless of our job or title. That passion was contagious. Even in the midst of trying times and a large-scale bureaucracy, I never once saw Tom Wagner take the easy path of cynicism. And he was quick to berate anyone who did.

"I've never met anyone at Tom's level of leadership who seems as authentic, as real," said Frumie Selchen, executive director of the Arts Alliance of Northern New Hampshire, a partner of the White Mountain National Forest in creating and sustaining an annual artist-in-residence. "He is truly interested in listening to people, regardless of their titles or authority; in every sense, he seems genuinely open to ideas and different ways of thinking. You never see the wheels turning or feel he's looking around the room for someone more influential or important to talk to."

Tom understands people but he also understands the land and the benefit of public land to all of us as Americans. He never acted as though his mission was an easy one, and he did his best to balance the tensions between conservation and preservation. He believes in both the benefits of sound timber harvesting and appropriate wilderness designation. He acts on the belief that, as citizens, we can work out our differences.

He models the idea that being a good citizen and being a good public servant are inseparable. He didn't just hold employees to that idea; he expected as much from everyone who cares about the WMNF, whether a partner organization, a hiker, a logger, or a tourist traveling a scenic byway. We all have to uphold our end of the bargain by holding our land managers accountable. Yet we must take responsibility for our own words and actions, as well. I was often amazed that Tom never seemed to hesitate to pick up the phone to call a disgruntled visitor. He was willing to admit when the Forest Service was in

the wrong and equally ready to defend his employees. He was also willing to gently remind the visitor of his or her own part in any misunderstanding.

For people close to the national forest, it's always a little concerning when a new forest supervisor arrives. Will she be a good fit? Will he "get it"? It's safe to say, Tom "got it."

Katie Stewart, a former Androscoggin district ranger, wrote to me in an email:

> When you have a leader at the top who embodies qualities such as wisdom, caring, honesty, inspiration, forward thinking, strong land ethic, and integrity, it set the standard and motivated me (for one) to work harder and smarter and to be a better person. Even if I disagreed with him, I respected his views. I believe he was always respectful of all the people he worked with, inside and outside the agency. . . . The leadership qualities he brought helped us all be better, better for the land we cared for and better for each other.

Like many people, I wonder, with a little bit of nervousness, what will happen next in the White Mountain National Forest. But I'm happy for Tom and his family. He'll get a break from a grueling schedule. I have no doubt he'll fill his time wisely. And I'm looking forward to more hikes with him—ones where we can just enjoy the national forest without trying to fix anything besides our aching knees.

—Rebecca Oreskes

Rebecca Oreskes retired from the U.S. Forest Service in 2013 after 25 years of service. She is a co-author of *Mountain Voices: Stories of Life and Adventure in the White Mountains and Beyond* (AMC Books, 2012) and has served on the boards of forest- and wilderness-related organizations. She serves on the Appalachia Committee.